Trends of Fiction in 2000s Japanese Pop Culture

In Japan the years between 2000 and 2009 are often known as 'another lost decade.' This follows the first 'lost decade' (from the early 1990s to the early 2000s), which resulted from the collapse of the bubble economy. Since the collapse, there has been a widening gap between rich and poor due to an ongoing recession that has worsened since the 1990s. In the 2000s this created a downturn in the labour market. Many new graduates found themselves unable to get full time jobs, and instead became trapped in part-time work due to a hiring freeze so severe it became known as 'the hiring ice age.'

In terms of social trends, popular culture in Japan has become further postmodernised since the 1990s; consumer categories and the content of cultural products have become further subdivided. As Jean-François Lyotard (1984) claims in his famous *The Postmodern Condition*, grand narratives such as world-scale ideologies have been lost, replaced by many little narratives that are narrow-scale imaginations shared with small numbers of people. These little narratives can help us to examine what people, especially youth in contemporary Japan, imagine in the 2000s, a period of social difficulties; their imaginations, described in popular culture works, reveal the hidden issues that they face and that mainstream culture tends to ignore.

This article discusses the imaginations of Japanese youth in the 2000s by examining three popular genres of fiction aimed at young male readers: *sekaikei* (end of the world crisis) fiction, which thrived from the late 1990s to the early 2000s; *sabaibukei* (survival) fiction, which became popular in the mid 2000s; and *nichijōkei* (slice of daily life) fiction, which became dominant in the late 2000s. First, I examine the contemporary Japanese *zeitgeist* since 1995 as discussed by sociologist Ōsawa Masachi. Next, I discuss the characteristics of these three genres by focusing on the role of the 'Other.' As the target audience of these three genres is primarily males between their early teens and late twenties, this study assumes that readers include so-called *otaku*: young, mostly male Japanese who avidly consume popular-culture rather than high-culture products.

The *Zeitgeist* since 1995 in Japan

Sociologist Ōsawa Masachi's discussion of the *zeitgeists* in postwar Japan provides a useful lens through which to examine these three different genres of fiction. Ōsawa examines the trajectory of the *zeitgeists* of postwar Japanese society in one continuum. In his book *The End of Fictional Age* (Kyokō no jidai no hate) (1996), he terms the *zeitgeist* from 1945 to 1969 "the idealistic age" (*risō no jidai*), and the *zeitgeist* from 1970 to 1995 "the fictional age" (*kyokō no jidai*); he insists that the idealistic age was a period in which meta-narratives such as political ideologies were still valid and functioning in reality, but the fictional age was one in which such meta-narratives were regarded as invalid in the real world, and ideals were quested for instead in fiction. Ōsawa (1996) locates the turning point from the idealistic age to the fictional age around 1970, the period when student activism such as the second *Anpo* and *Zenkyōtō* movements[1] began to fail. These failures meant that people started to seek ideals not in political movements and changes in the real world, but rather in imagined settings such as theme parks and in fictional characters.

In his following book *The Age of Impossibility* (Fukanōsei no jidai) (2008), Ōsawa terms the *zeitgeist* after 1995 "the age of impossibility." He argues that the end of the fictional age was brought about by two apocalyptic incidents, both of which took place in 1995: the Kobe Earthquake and the Aum sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway. The Kobe earthquake revealed the cruel power of nature, and it manifested 'real' reality to people in the fictional age: nature as unknown Other can destroy highly modernised, well maintained cities. On the other hand, the Aum incident can be regarded as the crystallisation of the fictional age; it showed that a small number of ordinary people, many of them from Japan's most elite strata, actually believed the super-fictive ideals of a new religious organisation whose doctrine comes from an esoteric combination of Buddhism and popular culture sources such as manga and anime. Ōsawa (2008) focuses on these two almost opposite inclinations toward reality, since not just Japanese society but the whole contemporary world has these characteristics. On one hand, there is a tendency in our time for many people to wish to escape—not *from*, but rather *into* the most realistic reality. That is, they want to experience the most radical and dangerous side of reality. One example is the increasing incidence of acts of self-harm such as wrist-cutting: physical pain is one of the most 'realistic' realities that we can experience as humans. Fundamentalism, terrorism, wars, religious and nationalistic fervour contain the ultimate violence of reality. The impulse among some young Japanese to visit arenas of war is also part of this tendency to desire escape *into* reality. The popularity of reality television is another familiar though perhaps less controversial example in our daily lives.

On the other hand, even after the end of the fictional age, society still tends toward fictionalisation by escaping *from* harsh reality, and the degree of fictionalisation of reality increases its purity even more than in the fictional age. People increasingly seek safe, fictionalised lives, which is to say reality without danger or risk. Ōsawa (2008) cites Slavoj Žižek's notion of decaffeinated coffee: people in the contemporary world want to enjoy only the *pleasurable* aspects of products or activities, so they exclude all the dangers and extract the element of pleasure. By excluding all the risks, what makes reality 'realistic' is completely lost, and the fictionalisation of reality becomes increasingly enforced. Non-alcoholic beer, sugar-free drinks, fat-free milk, virtual sex without danger or real human contact and war without sacrifice are clear examples of this tendency.

Ōsawa states that these two tendencies are opposite reactions to something unrecognisable. They both appear to be contradictory, since this 'something' is not what we actually experience nor recognise. Therefore he terms the contemporary *zeitgeist* in Japan "the age of impossibility:" we live in a time when we cannot easily recognise what drives us. From 1945 to 1969, we tried to make ideals come true *in* reality; from 1970 to 1995 we fabricated fiction *against* reality; and now we have something impossible to recognise *as* reality. This thing that is impossible to recognise or experience is, Ōsawa claims, Otherness: people desire the Other, but at the same time we cannot establish inter-subjective relationships with the Other, and thus we fear it. Now we come to seek the Other without Otherness. We want to be related to the Other who does us no harm and causes us no trouble. But is it possible to have a realistic relationship with such an Otherness-less Other? Ōsawa (2008) concludes that we have come to desire that which we cannot obtain, and that is how we live in the age of impossibility. According to him, therefore, the *zeitgeist* in 2000s Japan is the age in which we have serious difficulty in relating to each other.

Sekaikei fiction

Benedict Anderson (1997) calls the concept of a communal space in which ideologies are supported and social norms are defined "imagined communities," that is, virtual communal spaces in which people can meet and which exceed the limitations of existing village communities; Anderson explains that cultural imaginations create such communal spaces. Grand narratives such as ideologies and cultural/political movements have been shared by various types of imagined communities. Until the 1970s, people communicated in a communal space supported by modern ideologies that forced each member to share the reality created by grand narratives or worldviews. However, once the premise of grand narratives was no longer trusted in the 1980s, it became increasingly difficult to communicate by relying on consensus in these imagined communities. In Japan, the two apocalyptic incidents mentioned above, the Kobe earthquake and the Aum sarin incident, made Japanese society as an imagined community insecure and unreliable.

Critic and playwright Betsuyaku Minoru (1986) refers to communal space as the "middle ground," and claims that its role in fiction has changed. Whereas the space that one can touch/feel is the "foreground," the space that is very far away, such as the world/universe or transcendence, is the "background." It can be argued that the role of the middle ground, which mediates between the foreground and the background, weakened in the late 1980s, and that people started to connect issues in the foreground with issues in the background, bypassing the middle field entirely.

Critic Azuma Hiroki (2002) explains this phenomenon of the loss of communal space in Lacanian psychoanalytic terms, as the weakening of the Symbolic. He comments that Japanese youth tend to focus on their families, on their love relationships, and on apocalyptic catastrophes in the world or the universe, but rarely on their communities or the wider society. According to Lacan, close relationships belong to the world of the Imaginary, and far-off and abstract issues (such as the end of the world) belong to the world of the Real. That which mediates the Imaginary and the Real is the Symbolic, usually represented as larger communities, societies, and nation-states. Azuma (2008) claims that the imaginations of the younger generation combine the Imaginary directly with the Real. The weakening of the Symbolic, or the middle ground, brought the birth of a new apocalyptic imagination called *sekaikei* in Japan after 1995.

Sekaikei, a neologism literally meaning the world-oriented theme, are subcultural works which include animation, manga, games and light novels[2] on the combined theme of apocalyptic crisis and school romance.[3] The number of works in the *sekaikei* genre increased after the boom of the animated series *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (1995-1996), and *sekaikei* continued to be one of the main motifs in Japanese subculture in the 2000s. Many see in these *sekaikei* works the unmistakable influence of *Evangelion*, so the *sekaikei* phenomenon is also referred to as the Post-Evangelion Syndrome.

In a narrow sense, *sekaikei* works deal with situations in which the foreground (love between the always male protagonist and the heroine) is directly connected to the background (apocalyptic crisis and the end of the world) without the mediation of the middle ground, such as communities and societies. The apocalyptic crises depicted are usually wars with the potential to end the world or even the universe, and the actions and crises of the protagonist and the heroine are synchronised with this fate. Society, nations, states, and international institutions are largely absent or even completely non-existent (Kasai, 2009). And it is not only the middle ground that is missing: Otherness is also largely absent from *sekaikei* fiction; heroines in the narratives often play the role of mother to the protagonists, and the love of the empowered heroines for the adolescent male protagonists is often depicted as unconditional. Secondary characters are either mirrors or shadows of the protagonist, whom they never seriously confront. Also, the reasons for the apocalyptic crisis are rarely explained at all in *sekaikei* stories, and there are almost no detailed explanations of wars. Characters in the narratives do not know what is righteous or evil, for moral norms cannot be structured without the presence of, or reference to, the Symbolic.

Representative *sekaikei* works according to this definition include the animation *Hoshi no koe* (The Voices of a Distant Star; 2002) by Shinkai Makoto;[4] the manga *Saishū heiki kanojo* (Saikano: The Last Love Song on This Little Planet; 2000-2001) by Takahashi Shin;[5] and the light novel *Iriya no sora, UFO no natsu* (Iriya's Sky, Summer of the UFOs; 2001-2003) by Akiyama Mizuhito.[6] These works are profoundly related to the infantile psychological theme of omnipotence and the adolescent psychological theme of maturity (Kasai, 2009). The audience for most *sekaikei* works is the young male *otaku*,[7] though the live-action film version of *Saikano* targets a young female audience too.

Sekaikei works offer themes and settings tailored to their young male audience. The main character is typically a high school student; through some coincidence he meets a girl, the heroine, who is an invincible warrior. In *Saikano*, for example, protagonist Shūji is in love with Chise, an ordinary school girl who, it turns out, is the ultimate biological weapon, developed by the Japan Self-Defense Forces without her knowledge or consent in order to defend the world from imminent invasion. In *The Voices of Distant Stars*, Noboru is an ordinary junior high school boy who is in love with his classmate, Mikako, a seemingly ordinary girl who, it is suddenly revealed, has been chosen as a mecha pilot for the United Nations Space Army, which will fight a group of aliens who have attacked humans. In *Iriya's Summer*, protagonist Asaba Naoyuki meets heroine Iriya Kana, a biological weapon made to fight space invaders. In all three stories, the heroines are extraordinarily empowered as biological weapons or mecha pilots. Larger communities, society, and the national frame of Japan are largely undescribed (although there may be brief mentions of the United Nations, for example), and the reasons for the war or impending crisis are not explained at all. *Evangelion* incorporates some middle distance such as society and community: it describes the UN forces, Seele, and Nerv as international organisations, as well as the ordinary junior high school attended by Shinji, Rei, and Asuka. However, the middle distance is largely absent from *sekaikei* works: even though the main characters are students, other students and teachers do not play important roles in the stories.

The heroines in these stories fight apocalyptic crises while the male protagonists are in love with these empowered girls but play little role in the fight. Rather, these boys recognise that they are just observers of the suffering heroines, and loathe themselves for their own incompetence. In *Evangelion*, Shinji is a fighter, albeit a somewhat reluctant one, but *sekaikei* protagonists do not even get this far. Indeed, many of the main male characters in *sekaikei* fiction declare that they would rather *not* save the world to protect their heroines, but the appeal of their love makes the heroines decide to protect the world for the *boys*' sake (although they do not always succeed—at the end of *Saikano*, for example, the heroine chooses to become a spaceship-like object to save her boyfriend Shūji from the dying Earth). By being loved by the competent heroine, the passive protagonist indirectly gains the power to control the world. This is a form of the "super-fictionalised reality without violence and danger" discussed by Ōsawa Masachi following Slavoj Žižek: the protagonists want to be involved in an important fight without actually fighting, to encounter the Other without risk or stress, and to obtain power without facing danger (Osawa, 2009).

In *Evangelion*, Shinji's Others, such as his parents, his friends, or the Angels, are still described even though they turn out not to be totally Other for him in the end. These Others at least create tension and confrontation within Shinji. A father, albeit an incomplete/unnecessary one, plays an important role in the series. On the other hand, in *sekaikei* works, there is no true Other who creates such tension. It is also notable that there are no fathers or father figures in *sekaikei* stories, and that the enemies are not described at all, even when they attack the Earth. Visible enemies and symbolic Others have long represented a threat in apocalyptic narratives: especially after the Second World War, the atomic bombings and the United States often play the threatening role. In *sekaikei* stories, though, there are neither illustrations nor descriptions of enemies: we never know what they are, what they look like, and why they attack, just that they bring an end-of-the-world crisis.

Instead, there are heroines who truly love the protagonists, and who are empowered to fight for the world and are brave and selfless enough to give their lives to save their boyfriends. These heroines act almost as mothers, with unconditional love for the protagonists, and in fact a remarkable number of *sekaikei* stories end with the theme of returning to the womb, with boy characters showing no signs of growth or maturation—in *Saikano*, as mentioned, the heroine transforms into a spaceship-like object and literally encloses her boyfriend within herself in order to protect him. There are no death battles or serious conflicts with the Other depicted in these stories. This strongly suggests that the boy characters in *sekaikei* are seeking a kind of mother-infant relationship, and indeed some commenters are harshly critical of *sekaikei* works for precisely this reason (Uno, 2008). *Sekaikei* establishes itself without inter-subjective relationships and visions for the future. As Jean Baudrillard (cited by Berger, 1999) says, there is no 'unveiling' in the postmodernised world since there is nothing under the surface. This is particularly true of the *sekaikei* genre; in these stories, there is nothing but the hypertrophic self-consciousness of the protagonist.

Sabaibukei: the theme of survival

The second trend that appeared in the early 2000s is termed *sabaibukei*, a term used by critic Uno Tsunehiro in his book *Zero nendai no sōzōryoku* (Imaginations in the 2000s) (2008). Uno insists that *sabaibukei* is the new imagination of the early 2000s born after *sekaikei* imagination, which had thrived since the late 1990s. He posits that the endless Heisei recession and the unstable social situation caused by apocalyptic events such as the Aum incident and the Kobe earthquake shaped the *sekaikei* world view. The boom of *sekaikei* implies the difficulty of self-realisation. He claims that Japan has transformed from a place where people can be rewarded for their effort into one in which they cannot be rewarded despite making their best efforts. Uno (2008, p.14) argues that society has changed from an "inconvenient but warm place where people can find values easily" to a "free but cold place where we cannot find values easily." He asserts that the discovery of a society in which people cannot find meaning, values, and ethics despite their efforts created the *sekaikei* imagination, in other words, the withdrawal/self-conscious worldview.

However, he finds that this *sekaikei* worldview started to disintegrate in the early 2000s due to three major incidents: the September 11 attacks in the U.S., the neo-liberalistic structural reforms in Japan led by Prime Minister Koizumi Jun'ichiro, and the aggravation of the widening gap in society between rich and poor. These incidents led youth to feel that they could not survive by merely withdrawing and waiting for affirmation by the perfect Other in the *sekaikei* mode. Instead, they began to choose 'small narratives' to shape their lives and identities to some extent, and they themselves became responsible for their choice of these narratives. But, they are aware both that these small narratives cannot be ultimately supported by grand narratives such as history, nation, and ideologies, as they could before, and also that they sometimes need to fight with others who believe in different small narratives (Uno, 2008).

Uno defines *sabaibukei* as the genre of the death game scenario, and he considers the most famous forerunner to be Takami Kōshun's *Batoru rowaiyaru* (Battle Royale, 1999).[8] In this genre of fiction, the main characters, usually young teenagers, are forced to play a life-threatening game. Unlike in *sekaikei* works, there does exist a middle ground in *sabaibukei*: the Symbolic, represented by society, the government, the police, the army, and authority. And the main characters have relationships with their middle grounds by playing the game. In *sekaikei* works, the middle ground does not exist, or if it does, it is very opaque. In *sabaibukei*, however, society is mostly described as either totally unreliable or as amoral, irrational, and dystopian, a place where virtue and ethics have no meaning.

Sabaibukei stories often begin with an authority figure such as a king, a government, or a god of death deciding to start a game of survival in a limited area such as on an isolated island. The contestants will be specific members of society, perhaps school children in a certain grade, or people with a particular surname. The reason for the game is rarely satisfactorily explained; for example, in *Riaru onigokko* (The Chasing World), the king decides to hunt and kill people with surname Sato since there are too many people with that name. The main characters, usually male teenagers, are forced to kill according to the arbitrary rules of the game. Enemies in *sabaibukei* are mostly minor characters; the main character often has a partner in the game, but most of the other characters are the people whom they must battle. According to Uno, representative works of *sabaibukei* are the novel *Riaru onigokko* (The Chasing World, 2001) by Yamada Yusuke,[9] the TV series *Kamenraidā Ryūki* (Masked Rider Ryūki, 2002-03),[10] and the game soft *Fate/stay night* (2004) by TYPE-MOON.[11] The manga *DEATH NOTE* (2003-06) by writer Ōba Megumi and artist Obata Ken[12] is widely regarded as the most representative work of *sabaibukei*.

The novel *Batoru rowaiaru* (Battle Royale, 1999) by Takami Kōshun is widely seen as either a forerunner to the *sabaibukei* genre or its most representative work. It is certainly one of the best-known outside Japan. Set in 1997, the story is of an ultimate survival game played by forty-two members of a junior high school class in a fictional totalitarian East Asian nation called the Pan-Asian Republic, which holds an annual national defense program of pragmatic fighting simulations for fifteen-year-old students. In the movie adaptation, on the other hand, the story is set in near-future Japan, where adults fearing youth violence have instituted the Battle Royale Law, usually called "the program," as a deterrent.

In both the film and the novel, the reason of starting such a program is irrational and amoral. The classmates are given three days to kill each other, and there can only be one winner: this sole survivor can return home. The army explains the detailed rules of the death game, and gives the students the maps, weapons, food, and water they will need during the program. Students are forced to wear explosive collars fitted with GPS. The main character Nanahara Shūya tries to survive with his classmate Nakagawa Noriko by cooperating with Kawada Shōgo, the winner of the previous year's program. The story describes in vivid detail the death game: how the students argue, kill each other, struggle to escape, or commit suicide. In the beginning of the narrative, the audience assumes that the Other is the game host or the military officers who force the students to play the game. Yet once the battle starts, every contestant becomes a total Other, for the game turns every player into an enemy. With Kawada's help, Shūya and Noriko kill the game host and leave the island together, planning to escape from the country, as they are wanted for his murder. The story ends when they decide to escape from the power of the authority.

Battle Royale has both action and horror elements. The *sabaibukei* masterpiece *DEATH NOTE*, on the other hand, has detective and suspense elements. It describes the thrilling game of survival between the main character Yagami Light and the detective L and his successors. Susan Napier (2010, p.357) comments that *DEATH NOTE* succeeds most brilliantly as entertainment even though the series mainly revolves around killing: "the games that Light and L play, although they involve death and destruction, are most interesting mind games, as we watch two brilliant players try to anticipate and outmaneuver each other's every move." The story begins when high school student Yagami Light, known as Kira, discovers a supernatural notebook, the "Death Note," which has been dropped to Earth by a *shinigami* (a god of death) named Ryuk. Ryuk says that he intentionally dropped the notebook in the human world since he is "bored" in Hell. The Death Note grants its user the ability to kill anyone whose name and face they know, by writing their name in the notebook while picturing their face in their mind. There are a number of rules and limitations, but Light makes the most of the book by killing criminals. The series describes Light's attempt to create and rule a world without evil as he plays god using the notebook, and the efforts of a genius detective and his successors to stop him.

Compared with *Battle Royale*, society in *DEATH NOTE* does not seem particularly amoral at first glance; Light's father is a high-ranking police detective, and the story describes the efforts of detective L, Interpol, and the Japanese police to chase Light/Kira, who continues to kill felons. However, the story also describes members of the police who fear Kira or do not trust L, as well as common people who adore Kira as a new god who is ridding the world of evil. At the beginning of the series, people see Kira as a serial killer, yet as the story develops people all over the world support him. Eventually the President of the United States officially announces that the U.S. has decided to support Kira, for he can no longer ignore the fact that those who do become dominant.

In the middle stage of the story, Light successfully deceives and kills L. However, L's successor discovers Kira's identity, and in the end of the story Light dies when the detective proves that he is Kira and the death god Ryuk finally writes Light's name in the notebook. Even after Light dies, though, the police officers are not sure whether they did the right thing, and there are large numbers of people who still adore Light/Kira as a god, as we see in a panel depicting a line of worshipping people walking up to a mountain top. *DEATH NOTE* indicates the fact that we live in the world in which there are no grand narratives, and where each person has to believe in his or her own small narratives. People can believe in what they want to believe, yet those small narratives are not particularly supported by absolute social justice, morality, virtue, or ethics. In the story Light sees himself as a god and does not love or respect anyone, even his father and his girlfriend Misa. For Light, the main Other is detective L (and his successors), but throughout the story, Light attempts to kill them, because they are interrupting his mission. In this story, the Other is a perfect enemy, someone whom Light must either kill or be killed by.

As discussed, the *sabaibukei* worldview indicates that society is a dystopian place where grand narratives no longer exist. The representatives of the Symbolic, such as authority, the government, adults, and even the supernatural, lose their confidence and are not sure what is right or wrong: in other words, they are not playing their proper roles as authorities, instead imposing deadly games with complex and irrational rules onto the young characters. The youth are forced to play the game; the game may kill them, but if they refuse to play they will die anyway. The idea that everyone must be immediately dead or alive in a limited space/condition is thrilling in one sense, however, it is within a highly closed imagination. In some early *sabaibukei* works such as *Battle Royale* there are characters who escape the death game, and Uno (2008) indicates that there are others, like *LIAR GAME* (2005-), a manga series in which characters forced to play a game try to stop it. However, in most *sabaibukei* works the players, no matter how reluctant, do not challenge the rules imposed by the adults.

Also, there is little variation in relationships with the Other in *sabaibukei*. Others in this genre are either enemies or supporters. Supporters are few, and most relationships are hostile. The rest of the people are just bystanders, idle observers who do nothing. It is very difficult to think that *sabaibukei* works nourish the idea of meaningful inter-subjective relationships between the self and the Other, partly because the genre belongs to the world of horror and suspense, and partly because the main aim of the protagonists is to beat or to take advantage of the Other. Yet, as Uno insists, the rise of *sabaibukei* works in the mid 2000s can be seen as an indication that male youth are choosing to take initiative to solidify their social identities; surviving the games symbolizes their active will to commit to the environment and secure their identities without grand narratives, unlike *sekaikei* fiction, which passively grants their identities by making them merely loved unconditionally by the perfect heroine who plays the dual roles of mother/girlfriend.

Nichijōkei: The Slice of Life

While *sabaibukei* imagination prevailed in the mid 2000s, another type of fiction gradually rose to prominence. This new genre is called *kūkikei* (the genre of air) or *nichijōkei* (the 'slice of life' genre).[13] According to a study by Kinema Junpō Research Institute (2011), this genre was born in the *yonkoma manga* (four cell manga) format, and describes teen drama in daily school life by using slice of life narrative techniques. Stories in *yonkoma manga* are often developed as animated series or films

It is often regarded that *Azumanga daiō* (Great King Azumanga), drawn by Azuma Kiyohiko,[14] is the origin of *nichijōkei yonkoma manga* (Uno, 2009). Examples of *nichijōkei* works are *Hidamari suketchi* (Sunshine Sketch), drawn by Aoki Ume and serialized since May 2004,[15] and *Rakisuta* (Lucky Star), drawn by Yoshimizu Kagami and serialized in Kadokawa Shoten's *Comptiq* magazine since January 2004.[16] The most successful *nichijōkei* work is *Keion!* (K-On!), drawn by Kakifly.[17] It is notable that all of these popular works were originally *yonkoma manga*.

Nichijōkei works have a number of specific features. First, the setting of the story is limited to daily life in contemporary Japan, such as the main characters' schools or neighborhoods, and the basic story lines feature no conflicts, difficulties, trouble, very unhappy events, serious love relationships, or complex family relationships. *Nichijōkei* stories are therefore considered rather thin, mainly featuring rambling chatting on superficial topics concerning daily life. For example, in the first story of the anime *Rakisuta*, the main characters just discuss their own ways of eating a snack called *choco corone*.

Secondly, the main characters are all beautiful girls tailored according to *moe* dynamics.[18] There are typically four to five girls from elementary school age to high school age, with specific *moe* features such as long, colorful hair, big eyes, and slim bodies. Uno (2011) points out that most *nichijōkei* works consist of homosocial relationships between these beautiful girls. While *sekaikei* works usually have passive boy characters with whom male *otaku* consumers can identify, there is no main boy character in most *nichijōkei* works. Thus is because they would be a distraction for male *otaku* consumers who have *moe* feelings for the beautiful girls and wish purely to 'possess' them rather than to fall in love with them. If there is a boy character in a *nichijōkei* work and he falls in love with one of the beautiful girls, the need to explicate the developing love relationship arises, and this destroys the *nichijōkei* 'nothing-happens' mode. Therefore, works that describe ordinary human life, such as *Sazae san* and *Chibimaruko chan*, and ordinary animal life, such as *Bonobono*, are not defined as *nichijōkei*, as these works do not deal with homosocial relationships between beautiful school girls.

Thirdly, *nichijōkei* works often comprise a hybrid of reality and fiction. As described, the main characters have highly fictive features, but the background of the animation uses real settings, real landscapes, or real materials. For example, in the anime *Rakisuta*, the father of one of the main characters works as head priest at Takanomiya Shrine, a real shrine which exists in Saitama, and the series uses a realistic drawing of the actual shrine. This has resulted in the phenomenon of fans of the anime actually visiting the places illustrated in the series. In a similar way, when characters in *Keion!* use real musical instruments in the story, fans buy the same ones. Also, the characters in *Rakisuta* use a lot of real *otaku* slang, a kind of shout-out to hardcore fans. In addition to these realistic features, there *nichijōkei* works also employ realistic time. While annual cycles in manga like *Sazae san* and *Chibimaruko chan* repeat without their characters ever aging, the main characters in most *nichijōkei* works, usually high school students, eventually grow up and graduate. Thus, the *nichijōkei* genre is based on the idiosyncratic characteristic of hybrid reality and fiction, and this hybridity is a feature that has appeal to its fans.

The most successful and representative *nichijōkei* works are *Rakisuta* and *Keion!* *Rakisuta* follows the daily lives of four girls who go to Ryōō High School in Saitama. The main character, Izumi Konata, is a typical *otaku* girl who loves anime (from the vintage to the contemporary), various kinds of games (adult games, online games, battle games and so on), and a wide variety of manga. Her friends Hiragi Kagami and Hiragi Tsukasa are twins. Kagami is described as goofy (*ten'nen boke*), and Tsukasa is described as *tsundere*, cold and strict at first or in public, but soft and loving in private or when she is alone with her boyfriend. Takara Miyuki is an honor student and *meganekko*, a geeky but cute girl who wears glasses, which is considered her most attractive trait. The most powerful *moe* elements are represented in all four main characters.

The story describes the girls' ordinary high school and college lives: exams, what they do during Christmas break, what happens when a character loses her glasses, and so on. There are no serious confrontations, arguments, or fights, no suffering, and really no problems at all. One might expect stories about high school girls and young women to include at least one character falling in love, but this does not happen: the stories are completely free of the tensions and otherness that male characters would bring. There are, however, a number of inside jokes and references to games, animations and manga which only core *otaku* fans can understand and enjoy. The fans of *Rakisuta*, mostly male youth, are apparently simply attracted by the charms of the main characters.

On the other hand *Keion!*, the most successful *nichijōkei* work, has more specific settings. The story revolves around four girls who join the light music club at Sakuragaoka Girls' High School to try to save it from breaking up. One of the characters, Hirasawa Yui, has no experience playing musical instruments or reading music, but she eventually becomes an excellent guitarist. From then on, Yui, along with bassist Akiyama Mio, drummer Tainaka Ritsu, and keyboardist Kotobuki Tsumugi, spend their school days performing and hanging out together. In their second year, the club welcomes another guitarist, underclass girl Nakano Azusa. After Azusa joins, their band gains more structure.

Keion! is set in the context of a music club, and so we must assume that the main characters must frequently practice their instruments. However, until the sixth of ten episodes in the animation series we see no such scenes at all. Instead, the story revolves around idle conversation, Yui procrastinating about joining the club, and the easy way in which they obtain their instruments. There is apparently no serious effort made to make a major debut, as one might expect. There is also no conflict surrounding artistic differences between the club members. In other words, the stories in *Keion!* intentionally erase all dramatic events, focusing instead on the mundane details of the daily lives of the characters in the slice of life mode.

As discussed above, it is notable that *nichijōkei* works totally lack both the middle ground and the background. We see that the settings of the stories in *nichijōkei* are mostly schools or neighborhoods but there are no larger communities described or even suggested. For example, even in stories set in schools we rarely see teachers or parents. In other words, the stories focus on the protagonists and intentionally exclude the intervention of the outer world. While *sekaikei* stories have the foreground (love relationship with the perfect beautiful fighting girl) and the background (the apocalyptic crisis of the world), *nichijōkei* stories only have the foreground (daily life in which nothing important happens).

Furthermore, there is no Otherness in the daily life depicted in *nichijōkei*. In *sabaibukei* there is someone/something to fight against in the game scenarios. *Sekaikei* has powerful heroines, although they are not totally Other to the protagonists due to their twin roles of girlfriend/mother. *Nichijōkei*, on the other hand, does not assume any Otherness at all: there is no real threatening or extraneous Other. Not only are teachers and parents excluded, people in the neighborhood and even school acquaintances rarely appear in the stories either: classmates who are not directly related to the circle of the main characters are totally ignored. Instead, *nichijōkei* focuses on the completely closed circle of the beautiful school girl protagonists, and there is no contamination by Others.

Sekaikei features impotent boys and *sabaibukei* often has male game players with whom the reader/viewer can easily identify. However, *nichijōkei* abandon even this, since their young male consumers want to 'possess' the *moe* characters rather than to establish the inter-subjective relationships with them, even virtually. *Sekaikei* and *sabaibukei* stories feature crises like the impending end of the world or the choice between life and death, yet *nichijōkei* avoids not only any kind of confrontation, but anything even remotely out of the ordinary. Thus, *nichijōkei* achieves the world without Other, society, and special events.

Conclusion

As I have argued, *sekaikei* has elements of desire for both highly dangerous reality and for super fictionalisation; a typical *sekaikei* story deals with an apocalyptic crisis but also has a super-fictionalised world view in which the protagonist is totally affirmed by a perfect invincible fighting beauty. There is no middle field such as community or society that mediates between the background apocalyptic crisis and the foreground love relationship. The world-ending crisis is described, yet the protagonist is safe—because the heroine protects him. He can even indirectly manipulate the situation without fighting and without risk to himself, because the heroine loves him so profoundly that she follows him. Since his heroine plays the dual role of mother and girlfriend, and since she both loves and affirms the impotent protagonist, there is no real Otherness in the story that truly affirms the identity of the main character.

Sabaibukei, on the other hand, reflects the impulse to escape into the most dangerous reality. As Ōsawa argues, some young people want to experience real danger, such as visiting war zones or experiencing violence, and desire to escape into this reality with the purified essence of 'the real.' Ōsawa argues that escaping into such violent realities is one of the reactions to the difficulty of establishing meaningful inter-subjective relationships and solidifying one's own identity. This suggests that some Japanese male youth cannot feel alive/real or connected to Others, or establish their identity without resorting to highly unusual situations or stimuli. In *sabaibukei*, the Other is the ultimately violent and dangerous figure of the human: enemies who impose the irrational rules of the death game and who may take the life of the protagonist in the fight. There are few supporters, and even they often betray (or are betrayed by) the protagonist in the end. *Sabaibukei* sets the goal of killing this kind of ultimate violent Other—even in the form of untrustworthy teammates—to survive, and the plots totally lack the establishment of a positive affirmation of identity and rich inter-subjective relationships. Society in *sabaibukei* works does not function properly; it is an amoral place where irrational games are held.

Among the three genres, *nichijōkei* would appear to have the most realistic settings and plots. However, the protagonists are unrealistic fictionalised figures tailored by *moe* dynamics. Even though *nichijōkei* stories describe their daily lives at school, the protagonists themselves are unrealistic beauties. There is a complete absence of Otherness: there are no authority figures, enemies, or even other classmates. The stories focus only on the closed homosocial relationships of the protagonists. It is crucial that *nichijōkei* stories have no male characters with whom male readers can identify; rather, the audience desires to observe these *moe* beauties in a voyeuristic way, and to possess them rather than to have love relationships with them, even imagined, vicarious ones. Furthermore, special events and goals are carefully avoided in *nichijōkei* narratives, while *sekaikei* and *sabaibukei* are based on very specialized settings and specific goals such as saving the Earth and maintaining a love relationship with a heroine, or surviving a death game. *Nichijōkei* thus achieves the world without Other, society, or special events, that is, a world without change, challenge, or growth.

As discussed above, it is evident that all three genres of popular fiction in 2000s Japan have the same characteristic of lacking rich inter-subjective relationships. The Japanese male youth portrayed in them have the contradictory desire to both *relate* themselves with the Other and solidify their identities through these relationships, and also to *exclude* Otherness from the Other. In *sekaikei* and *nichijōkei* it is clear that they want an Other who causes no trouble or serious confrontation, so that the stories provide what might be called Otherness-less Others. In *sabaibukei*, the Other is mostly someone highly dangerous whom the protagonist cannot trust, and the identity of the protagonist is only solidified by beating this monstrous Other. These three genres of fiction represent the fictional imagination of the difficulty of relating to the Other, and the absence of the middle ground that provides the place to meet the Other for Japanese male youth.

While these are to some extent niche genres with a relatively low number of devotees among young Japanese males, it is important to stress that the tendencies I have described do exist in contemporary Japanese society. According to the Annual Report of Health, Labour, and Welfare (2013), 61.4% of male youth aged between 18 and 34 do not have a romantic partner; in 1987 the number was 48.6%. The number of males who have female friends is only 9.4%, a significant drop from 23.6% in 1987. Perhaps most notably, the number of males who do not *want* a romantic partner is 27.6%. The numbers thus not only show an increase in the percentage of male youth who do not *have* particular girlfriends or female acquaintances, they also show that a significant minority do not even *want* such a relationship—at least not with someone specific and real.

The birth of the so-called rental friend business in the 2000s also suggests that many youth have difficulty establishing inter-subjective relationships. According to news program *Hōdō Stēshon* (News Station), rental friend services provide various types of actors who pose as friends for the needs of different clients. They usually offer both gay and straight 'friends' who cost around $80 to $100 each per hour (2014). The report revealed that the clientele are mostly young and their requirements are varied, including, for example, 'friends' for weddings, overseas trips, casual dates, concerts and so forth. The requirements may be different, but the services are clearly filling a common need: people feel ashamed and embarrassed if they are seen to have no friends, particularly at social events. Rather than taking the personal risk of trying to develop and maintain real relationships, however, the boom in rental friend businesses nationwide suggests that a significant number of youth have instead chosen to seek the Otherness-less Other.

As these trends show, in the 2000s a significant number of young male Japanese have difficulty meeting Others in reality. Nevertheless, although they want to avoid the trouble and confrontations inherent in real inter-subjective relationships, they still do not want to be regarded as—or known to be—completely alone. The diffusion and success of rental friend business suggests that the larger community is aware of these fears and difficulties: in contemporary Japan it is not only imagination in fictional works, but also services in real society that now provide Otherness-less Others.

The trajectory of the three genres of fiction I have introduced, and of current social trends, suggest that it is becoming more difficult for male youth to develop profound relationships and that the strength of stories and communities that had long offered youth the scenarios and places in which to meet Others have weakened during the 2000s in Japan. Future avenues for research include categories of contemporary Japanese fiction aimed female readers, and how the stories, characters, and inter-subjective relationships they contain compare with the trends described in the present article.

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Notes

[1] *Zenkyōtō* is an abbreviation of *zengaku kyōtō kaigi*, meaning 'the conference of all acidic dispute.' *Zenkyōtō* movements occurred between 1965 and 1970; in the earlier period they were successful, but they later degenerated into violent clashes between students and police with no clear goals. *Anpo* is an abbreviation of *nichibei anzen hoshō jōyaku*: Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security between the United States and Japan. The *Anpo* strife or movement refers to the anti-*Anpo*, anti-war movements that occurred twice: in 1959/60 and again in 1970. Like the *Zenkyōtō* movements, they were successful at first, but later were marked by violence without concrete goals. They remain the biggest political movements in Japanese history.

[2] *Raito noberu* (light novels) are a genre of novels born in contemporary Japanese subculture. They are entertainment novels primarily targeting teenagers and young adults, usually published as *bunkobon*, and often illustrated by popular manga artists. In recent years, light novel stories have been popular choices for adaptation into manga, anime, and live-action films.

[3] *Sekai* in the word *sekaikei* is usually written in katakana. Translator Jonathan E. Abel and Kōno Shion explain the term *sekaikei* as 'the kind of plot in anime and video games in which the small group of characters act as if their thoughts and actions can affect the fate of the entire world.' See Azuma Hiroki, *Otaku: Japan's Database Animals,* trans. Jonathan E. Abel and Kōno Shion (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2009), 124.

[4] *Voices of a Distant Star* was highly acclaimed because it was written, directed and produced entirely by one individual on his Macintosh computer. This animation won the Award for Image Design in the Entertainment Category in the Digital Contents Grand Prix, and the Highest Award of Public Offering Category at the 2002 Tokyo International Animation Fair 21.

[5] The manga version was serialized in Shōgakukan's *Big Comic Spirits* magazine. The manga story was adapted as a TV animation in 2002, an original video animation in 2005, and a live-action film in 2006.

[6] Later it was adapted as an original video animation in 2005, two video games for the Nintendo DS in 2007, and a manga series in the teen boys' magazine *Dengeki Maō* in 2007.

[7] According to Azuma's argument, male *otaku* culture can be divided into four generations: the first generation was born around 1960 (those who watched *Space Battleship Yamato*); the second generation was born around 1970 (those who watched *Mobile Suite Gundam*); the third generation was born around 1980 (those who watched *Neon Genesis Evangelion*); and the forth generation was born around 1990 (those who are accustomed to the Internet). In this article, the main target audience is usually considered to be the fourth generation of male *otaku*.

[8] The novel was turned into a film in 2000s by renowned director Fukasaku Kinji, and the film aroused both domestic and international controversy and was either banned outright or deliberately excluded from distribution in several countries. However, it was a mainstream domestic production, becoming the third highest-grossing film in 2000, and was eventually released in 22 countries worldwide. It received a global audience and critical acclaim and is one of Japan's most famous films, as is often regarded as one of Fukasaku's best works.

[9] The novel was turned into a movie series (*Riaru onigokko* in 2008, *Real onigokko 2* in 2010, *Riaru onigokko 3, 4, and 5* in 2012), and a manga drawn by Sugiyama Satoshi (Tokyo: Gentōsha, 2004). A TV drama series is scheduled for spring 2014.

[10] The original author of *Kamenraidā* is Ishinomori Shōtarō.

[11] It was originally released as R18-rated porn game soft, yet its story line of fighting to the death for the sacred cup became popular, and it was adapted as an animated film in 2010, and a 20-volume manga series from Kadokawa shoten.

[12] Manga *DEATH NOTE* was serialized in *Weekly Shōnen Jump* from 2003 to 2006, and turned into a live action film in 2006, the TV animation series in 2006, a novel in 2006 by Nishio Ishin, a game soft in 2007, and trading cards in 2007.

[13] A few critics differentiate *kūkikei* works from *nichijōkei* works, but most do not. Here I call them both *nichijōkei*.

[14] Developed into a web animation in 2000, an animation film in 2001, and a TV animation series in 2002.

[15] Later developed into a TV animation series in 2007, a novel in 2007, a trading card game in 2010, and a computer game in 2010.

[16] Series developed into drama CDs in 2005 and 2008, a TV animation series in 2007, computer games in 2005, 2007, 2008, and 2009, trading card games in 2009, a musical in 2012, and mobile applications in 2012.

[17] Developed into a TV animation series in 2009 and 2010, and an animation film in 2012.

[18] *Moe* is a Japanese slang word generally indicating special strong feelings of fondness toward characters in anime, manga, and game softs. The idea of *moe* is deeply related to the rise of the *otaku* culture.

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